

## Executive Director's Recommendation

*Commission Meeting: April 4, 2013*

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**PROJECT****Irrigation, Drainage, Water Collection, and  
Re-landscaping of the Mall – Phases II and  
III**

*The National Mall  
Washington, DC*

**SUBMITTED BY**

*United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service*

**REVIEW AUTHORITY**

*Approval*

*per 40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1) and (d)*

**NCPC FILE NUMBER**

*7110*

**NCPC MAP FILE NUMBER**

*1.41(70.00)43749*

**APPLICANT'S REQUEST**

*Preliminary and final approval of  
site development plans*

**PROPOSED ACTION**

*Approve as requested*

**ACTION ITEM TYPE**

*Staff Presentation*

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### PROJECT SUMMARY

The National Park Service (NPS) has submitted preliminary and final site development plans for Phases II and III of the reconstruction of the turf and soil on the National Mall. Phase I of the project addressed the three easternmost center lawn panels located between 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and 7<sup>th</sup> Street. The scope of Phases II and III includes the remaining lawn panels between 7<sup>th</sup> Street and 14<sup>th</sup> Street. The current project includes reengineering of the subsurface soil; planting new turf; constructing shallow, mountable curbs and gutters around the panels to harvest rainwater and contain the engineered soil; grading the panels with a slight crown along the centerline, and constructing a below-grade irrigation and water storage system. Along with the reconstruction of the turf and soil, Phases II and III incorporate recommendations included in the National Mall Plan to increase the size of the non-turf areas on the Mall to improve accommodations for public events.

### KEY INFORMATION

- The National Mall is one of the country's most prominent and historic landscapes used for national celebrations, special events, First Amendment activities, and all types of recreation.
- The types and intensity of uses on the National Mall have contributed to its poor condition including worn turf, heavily compacted soil, and poor drainage.
- The National Mall Plan, approved by the Commission in December 2010, recommended that the non-turf areas on the Mall be enlarged in order to better accommodate public events.
- Union Square, an area that is highlighted in the National Mall Plan for its potential to accommodate large public events, thereby reducing wear and tear on the lawn panels, was recently transferred to the Architect of the Capitol.

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## RECOMMENDATION

**Approves** the preliminary and final site development plans for Phases II and III of the turf and soil reconstruction on the Mall for the center lawn panels located between 7<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Streets, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 1.41(70.00)43749.

**Notes** that the project takes into account recommendations from the National Mall Plan to widen the non-turf areas on the Mall in order to improve accommodations for large public events and national celebrations.

## PROJECT REVIEW TIMELINE

<b>Previous actions</b>	<b>June 2010</b> – <i>Concept review of the Turf and Soil Reconstruction – Phase I.</i> <b>February 2011</b> – <i>Preliminary and final approval of Turf and Soil Reconstruction - Phase 1</i> <b>March 2012</b> – <i>Concept review of the Turf and Soil Reconstruction – Phases 2 and 3</i>
<b>Remaining actions</b> <i>(anticipated)</i>	<b>April 2013</b> – <i>Preliminary and Final Approval</i>

Prepared by Jennifer Hirsch  
3/28/2013

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## I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Site

The National Mall in Washington, DC, stretches west from the U.S. Capitol to the Potomac River, and north from the Thomas Jefferson Memorial to Constitution Avenue. The smaller area within the National Mall, located between Madison Drive and Jefferson Drive from 1st Street to 14th Street, is known as the Mall. The Mall is a historic landscape composed of turf panels aligned at the center of the east-west axis, which is flanked by rows of trees to the north and south and along Madison Drive and Jefferson Drive. The project site is the portion of the Mall located west of 7th Street.

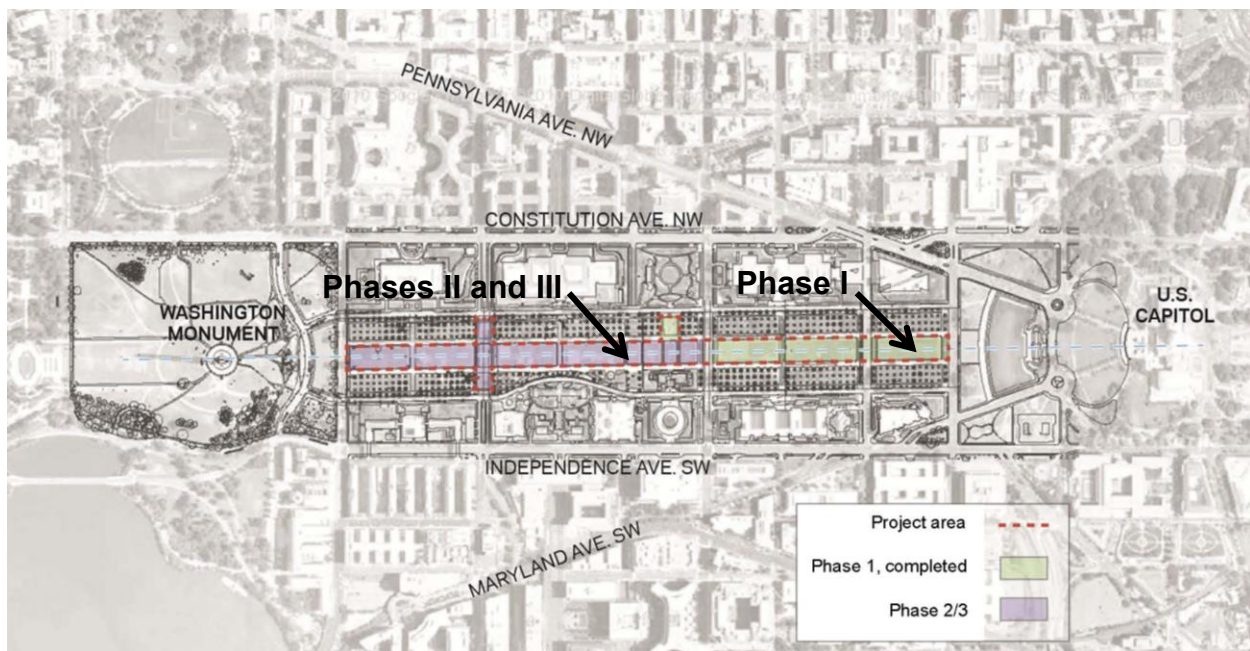


Figure 1: Project location

### Background

The National Mall Plan was approved by the Commission in December 2010 and establishes 30 objectives related to cultural and natural resource protection; access and circulation; visitor information, education, and enjoyment; visitor amenities; health, public safety, and security; and park operations. The National Mall Plan proposes to respectfully rehabilitate and refurbish the National Mall so that very high levels of use can be perpetuated. Among the areas to rehabilitate are the turf panels so that demonstrations, special events, cultural activities, other civic events, and passive recreation can continue to take place along the Mall.

One of the highest priorities in the National Mall Plan is the improvement of the health, appearance, durability, sustainability, and recoverability of the Mall turf. The soil is heavily compacted and does not drain well, the turf is often worn away and presents an irregular and uneven appearance, and the irrigation system does not function. The impact of heavy and sustained use creates a strain on the soil and turf, and also on the elm trees. The elm trees are located to the north and south of the center lawn panels along the Mall.



*Figure 2: Existing conditions of turf on the National Mall*

There has been no major reconstruction on the Mall since the Bicentennial. Since that time, demands on the Mall have increased with more frequent and longer events and higher visitation. The Mall hosts nearly 25 million visitors and around 3,000 special (permitted) events per year. Events include First Amendment gatherings and national celebrations, as well as significant public events like the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival and the Library of Congress' National Book Fair. Hosting these events is an essential purpose of the National Mall.

Phase I of the turf and soil reconstruction project preceded the Commission's formal adoption of the National Mall Plan. The Commission approved Phase I of the project in February 2011. Phase I addressed the three easternmost center lawn panels between 3rd Street and 7th Street and NPS recently completed construction on this portion of the project. While Phase I was generally consistent with the preferred alternative of the National Mall Plan, it did not include modifications to the non-turf areas as recommended in the plan. Phases II and III incorporate recommendations from the National Mall Plan with respect to widening the walkways in order to improve accommodations for public events.

### **Proposal**

The goals for the proposed turf and soil reconstruction project, as defined by NPS, are:

- Develop and establish a healthy and sustainable natural resources baseline for the Mall. Restore soils, improve turf and tree growing conditions
- Accommodate the high levels of use in a manner that sustains the character and integrity of the Mall.
- Maximize the site's potential for stormwater absorption and capture the run-off from the turf panels for use in irrigation, thereby minimizing the reliance on public potable water.



- Preserve existing trees and other vegetation to reinforce the historic landscape and emphasize native species.
- Improve the visual quality of the Mall.

Treatment of the lawn panels for Phases II and III are identical to Phase I. Most of the improvements to the lawn panels are below grade and are only minimally visible. Improvements include a shallow, mountable curb and gutter, 18 inches in width and ¼ inch in height, around the perimeter of the lawn panels. The purpose of the curb is to provide structural support and containment for the engineered soil and to direct stormwater to the below-grade water management system. NPS proposes White Mount Airy granite with a flame finish for the curb and gutter.

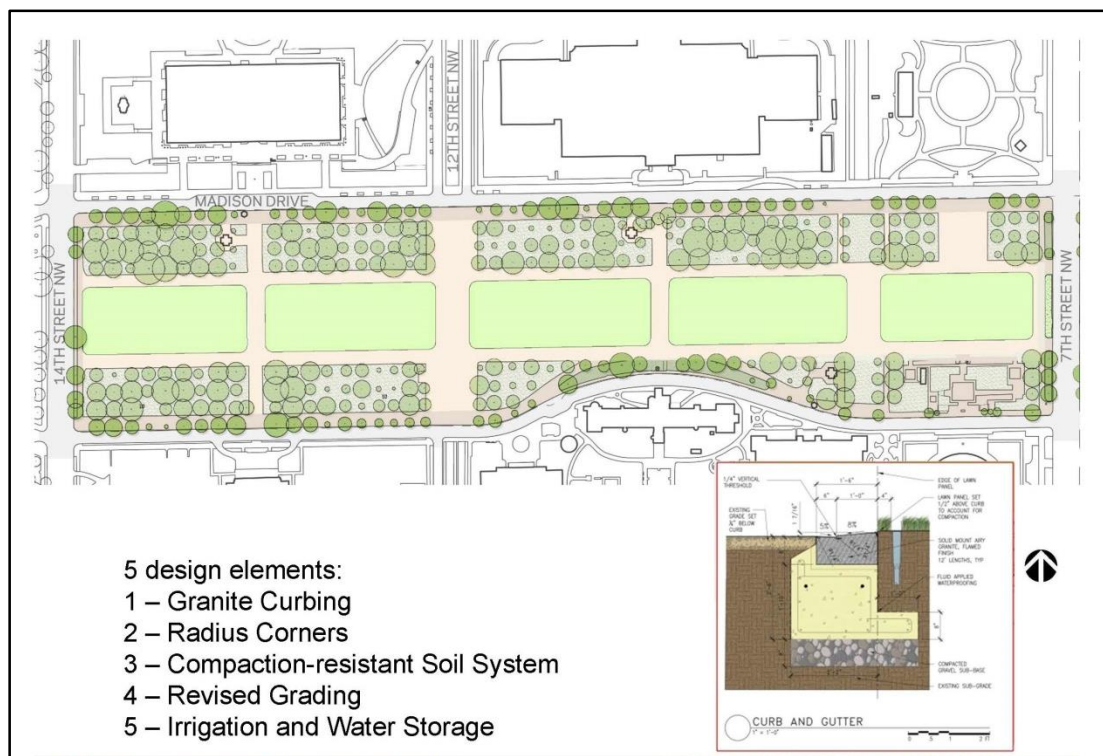


Figure 3: Proposed lawn panel treatment

The curb and gutter would be barely perceptible in height, and fully accessible to those using wheelchairs and strollers. The curb, comprising 12 inches in width of the total 18-inch width, will have an 8% slope with a ¼-inch vertical threshold. The gutter, comprising the outermost 6 inches of the 18-inch width, will have integrated grating-covered catch basins every 36 feet (and possibly farther apart) that will direct runoff into a stormwater drainage line under the lawn panels. The drainage lines will convey the collected runoff to below-grade storage cisterns.

Fifteen-foot curb radii are proposed for the corners of the lawn panels, which would return the curb radii to the dimension that existed in the 1930s -- when Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. implemented the McMillan Plan -- until the 1970s, when Skidmore, Owens, and Merrill

redesigned the roads and paths on the National Mall by, in part, filling the east-west street beds with gravel.

NPS proposes the 15-foot curb radii in part to restore the earlier appearance of the lawn panels, but also as a method of minimizing the compaction of the soil in the lawn panels and deterioration and loss of turf at the corners, a typical and unsightly condition with the current gravel paths, that results from heavy pedestrian traffic. In addition, gravel migrates to the lawn panels and soil migrates to the paths.

Rapid drainage of water is critical if the Mall is to continue to be scheduled for use for events, regardless of rain. Under the current conditions, water ponds at the edges of the gravel paths because it does not drain adequately. To facilitate better drainage, the center panels will be re-graded with a slight crown along the centerline to facilitate flow of water runoff in the gutters and drains. In addition, the gravel pedestrian paths will be re-graded slightly to drain toward the lawn panels and the gutters.

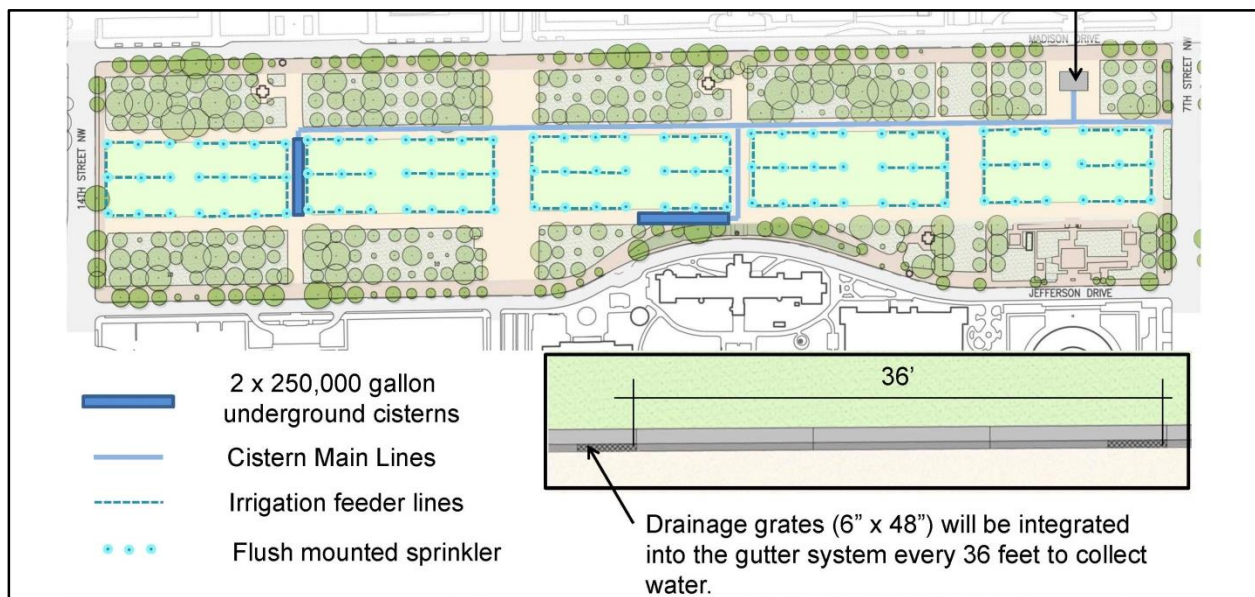


Figure 4: Proposed irrigation and water storage

Rainwater will be harvested through the new system of gutters. A reliable and durable drip irrigation system will be installed beneath the turf, deep enough to avoid puncture by tent stakes. Two, 250,000-gallon cisterns to be installed below the north – south and east - west walkways will connect to a network of lateral pipes and a below-grade pump station. The pump station, which was approved as part of Phase I, is currently under construction below the treeless, open panel on the 8th Street cross-axis south of Madison Drive. As part of Phase I two, 250,000-gallon cisterns were installed below the ground and therefore when Phases II and III are complete the total capacity of all four cisterns will be 1,000,000 gallons.

Accompanying the proposed water management system entails the full reengineering of the soil under the turf. The top six inches of existing soil will be removed and stockpiled at the site, with an additional 12 inches of soil removed from the site. The subgrade will be graded to contours parallel to the proposed finish grades and with a 2% cross slope on the lawn panels, an aggregate drainage layer will be laid, and coarse concrete sand will be added to the topsoil. The soil mix will then be added and compacted to the optimum density. The addition of Netlon (a soil mesh reinforcement product) or a similar product will be laid to a depth of six to eight inches below the finished grade to improve compaction resistance. The mesh is a benign, extruded plastic that is resilient to compaction. Finally, the turf (at present, proposed to be a blend of tall, turf-type fescue and fine fescue, mixed with 10% bluegrass) will be grown. The turf blend must accommodate short-term repairs and replacement after events, but also long-term health and viability.

### Walkways

Phases II and III of the turf and soil reconstruction include modifications to the walkways along the Mall based on recommendations made in the National Mall Plan. In developing a design to widen the walkways, NPS analyzed the requirements of the typical events held on the Mall annually, including two of the largest events on the Mall, the Library of Congress Book Festival and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, to evaluate the size and layout of the structures and associated equipment typically required for these events. A variety of equipment and tent sizes are installed on the Mall during special events and therefore the space needs to be flexible to accommodate a wide range of activities. Temporary tents, structures, and equipment can lead to destruction of the turf in less than two weeks when the turf is covered.

NPS analysis showed that the existing configuration of the walkways between 7th and 14th Streets could not meet the needs of these events without strategically widening them. NPS considered whether the walkways would need to be widened if the event structures were placed in Jefferson and Madison Drives as placement of structures on paving is considered a sustainable practice that will protect the turf. The analysis concluded that even if many of the event structures were shifted onto the adjacent streets, there would still be a need to place structures on the lawn panels and therefore the walkways need to be widened in order to preserve the lawn panels.



Figure 5: Existing configuration of walkways along the Mall

The proposed design was inspired by the Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. plan of 1936 which divided the Mall into eight approximately equal lawn panels. Olmsted's plan called for wider paved areas in the form of active streets and sidewalks between the lawn panels. The current proposal calls for specific north-south walkways to be widened so that tents and structures used for events can be concentrated on non-turf areas rather than on the lawn panels. Specifically, the following modifications will be made to the walkways and lawn panels:

1. The four segmented panels just west of 7<sup>th</sup> Street will be consolidated into a single lawn panel, re-establishing the historic design of the Mall that called for a total of eight lawn panels between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Streets. Two narrow north-south walks will be removed.
2. Five north-south walkways west of 7<sup>th</sup> Street will be widened:
  - a. The 16-foot north-south walk immediately west of 7<sup>th</sup> Street will be increased to a width of 60 feet.
  - b. The two, 40-foot-wide north-south walks on either side of the 9<sup>th</sup> Street alignment will be replaced by a single, 105-foot-wide walk, aligned with 9<sup>th</sup> Street.

- c. The 40-foot north-south walk aligned with 10<sup>th</sup> Street will be increased to a width of 60 feet.
  - d. At the 12<sup>th</sup> Street alignment, the two existing walks and the lawn in between them will be replaced with a single, 105-foot-wide walk.
  - e. At the 13<sup>th</sup> Street alignment, the existing walk width will be increased slightly to 60 feet.
  - f. The walk at 14<sup>th</sup> Street will remain 25-feet wide.
3. The new walkway aligned with 12<sup>th</sup> Street will extend between the tree panels to the north and to the south (adjacent to the Smithsonian Metro station), and replace the existing turf with pavement to a width of 146 feet.
4. All east-west walks remain 40-feet wide.



Figure 6: Proposed site plan

Along with widening the walkways to provide additional non-turf areas for tents and structures, NPS has developed a Mall Turf Operation and Maintenance Manual to revise how events are managed on the Mall. This Manual provides a specific process for permit requirements, a fee and cost recovery structure, event policies, event security protocol, and public safety requirements. The Manual will be instrumental in managing events on the Mall and establishes policies limiting how long the turf can be covered as well as a schedule for turf preparation and recovery periods between events. In addition, the Secretary of the Interior signed Secretarial Order 3326: Management and Protection of the National Mall and its Historic Landscape on January 24, 2013 to further the goals of the National Mall Plan and guide NPS as it rehabilitates the Mall. The Secretarial Order along with the Mall Turf Operation and Maintenance Manual provide tools for NPS to improve the management and use of the Mall, thereby allowing for special events and activities, but also protecting the landscape as a historic and natural resource.

## II. PROJECT ANALYSIS/CONFORMANCE

### Executive Summary

The proposed design scheme balances the preservation of the Mall as a cultural landscape by protecting the character-defining continuous greensward or tapis vert while also allowing for an increase in non-turf areas to accommodate large public events. Staff acknowledges the challenge

of developing a strategy to accommodate a variety of uses and events in one of the nation's most prominent historic landscapes. By limiting where the walkways will be widened to specific areas along the Mall that correspond to the surrounding urban design context, the project will allow for the rehabilitation of the turf while also allowing one of the most used public areas in the national capital to hosts national celebrations.

### **Analysis**

When the Commission approved Phase I of the turf and soil reconstruction, it commended NPS for providing improved stewardship of the cultural and natural resources on the National Mall, for improving the physical conditions for permitted and informal activities on the National Mall, and for improving the sustainability of resources and management practices. At the time Phase I was approved, the subject of most discussion was the installation of a low curb and gutter around the perimeter of the center lawn panels. An identical curb and gutter system will be used on the lawn panels for Phases II and III. In addition, as NPS proposed for Phase I, Phases II and III will utilize a 15-foot radius at the corners of the lawn panels. The curbs will provide a visual cue to visitors to stay on the gravel paths when reaching a path intersection, rather than cutting across the panel corners. The curb and gutter are shallow and easily mountable by wheelchair and stroller users who wish to use the center lawn panels. More important, the curb and gutter will mark where vehicles used during special events should not drive more emphatically than the current irregular edges can do.

While construction of the curb and gutter represents an alteration to the current 1970s scheme of gravel paths and grass panels, and therefore a diminution of integrity of the SOM design to some degree, staff has determined that the poor and unhealthy appearance of the grass panels, damage to the turf and to the elm trees from soil compaction, and the erosion of the corners diminish the integrity of the SOM design and intention for the National Mall to a greater degree than what is being proposed. Therefore, Staff's analysis for Phases II and III focused on the proposed walkway widening.

In determining how and where to widen the walkways on the Mall, NPS analyzed the requirements of typical events held on the Mall every year. This analysis confirmed that the existing configuration of the walkways between 7th and 14th Streets could not meet the needs of these events without strategically widening them. The highest intensity of use was during the summer months and also the lawn panels between 7<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Streets held the largest events with the most participants. If the walkways were not widened, there would be a need to place tents and equipment on the lawn panels. The analysis indicated that structures placed on the lawn would cause the death of the turf in 9 days. The results of the analysis indicated that placing tents and structures on non-turf areas was a sustainable practice that would protect the turf.

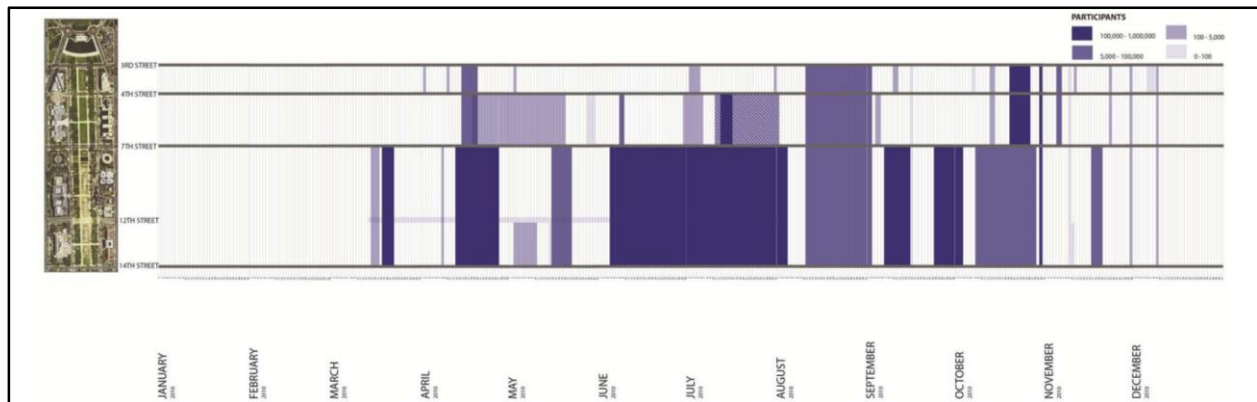


Figure 7: Diagram of event intensity along the Mall

Based on the size and number of the most common tents and structures used during events, NPS devised a design that would allow for the largest tents to be accommodated in specific locations along the walkways. For example, a large tent of 60 or 80 feet will be accommodated along the 9th or 12th Street corridors where the walkway will be widened to 105 feet. With a 80 foot tent in place, both of these walkways will also accommodate a 15 foot wide pedestrian walk and emergency access route. Approximately 10 feet will be needed for tent/stage support space along the walkway. Along 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Street where the walkways will be widened to 60 feet, a 35 foot tent will be accommodated with the same 15 foot wide pedestrian walk and 10 feet for tent/stage support space. The east-west walkways will remain at 40 feet and will accommodate smaller tents up to 15 feet in size, a 15 foot pedestrian/emergency access way, and a 10 foot wide area for existing site furnishings.

Based on the information provided by NPS regarding the intensity of events held on the Mall, in order to protect the lawn panels and turf, widening the walkways in strategic locations is key to preserving and rehabilitating the historic landscape. In addition, by minimizing the width of the non-turf areas to 105 feet in only 2 locations – along 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Street, the continuous greensward and views across the Mall between the U.S. Capitol and Washington Monument will be maintained. Therefore, because the overall character of the continuous greensward or tapis vert of the Mall will be maintained, staff recommends the Commission approve the preliminary and final site development plans for the reconstruction of the center lawn panels.

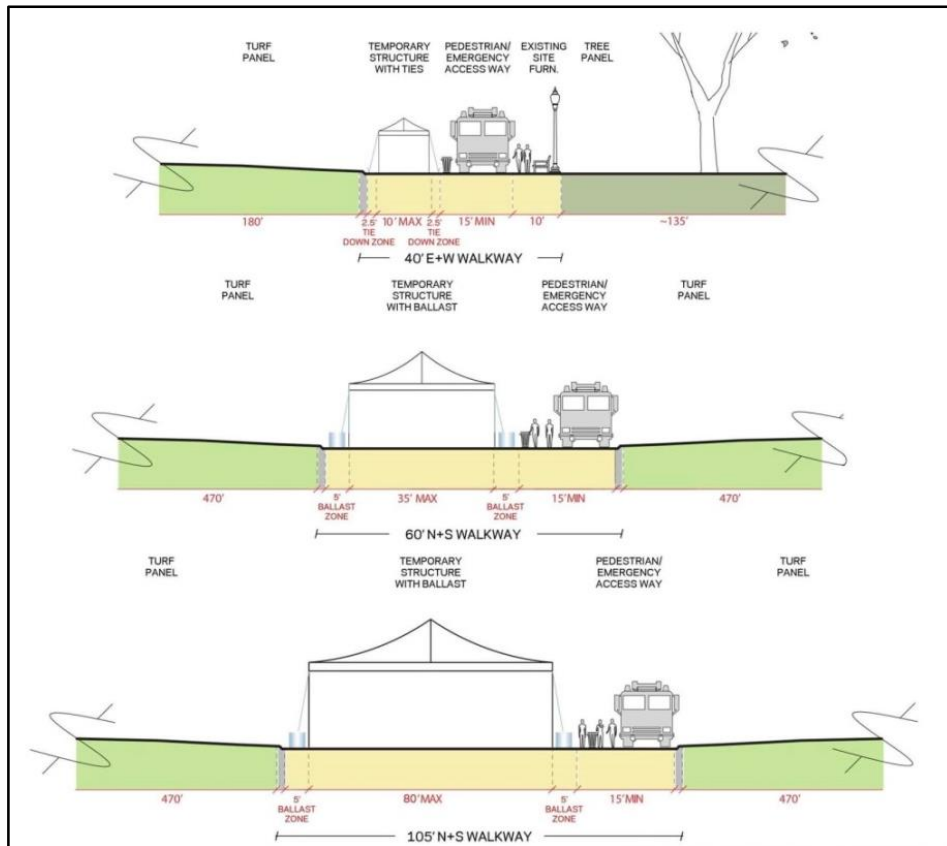


Figure 8: Sections indicating possible tent layout on walkways

In 2011, the Commission along with other federal, regional, and District of Columbia agencies issued the Federal Triangle Stormwater Drainage Study Report. This report was undertaken following the 200-year storm event that the District of Columbia experienced in June 2006. After the 2006 storm event, several federal and District of Columbia agencies held a forum to identify steps that stakeholders could pursue to reduce the risk of flooding in the Monumental Core. One of the recommendations of the forum was the evaluation of the existing sewer capacity of the Federal Triangle. The Federal Triangle Stormwater Drainage Study Report evaluated the sewer capacity and identified six alternatives to mitigate interior drainage flooding. One alternative identified was the storage of stormwater beneath the National Mall and the study identified the capacity such a system would be required to take for a 50, 100, or 200-year event. While Phases II and III of the proposed project will add 500,000 gallons of storage capacity for a total of 1,000,000 gallons (500,000 gallons were constructed as part of Phase 1), this will only accommodate the irrigation needs of the Mall and will not provide flood protection. However, approval of the current project as proposed by NPS does not preclude the construction of a larger water storage system should funding become available. The Federal Triangle Stormwater Drainage Study highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of constructing a storage system below the National Mall. Some of the advantages included a reduction in costs associated with having to treat potable water for irrigation and also having the facility below grade and therefore



the ability to minimize its visibility. Disadvantages included the costs associated with the construction of such a large storage system and the need for ancillary facilities such as a new collection sewer and pumping station.

### **Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital**

Phases II and III of the turf and soil reconstruction would not be inconsistent with the Federal Elements of the Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital. The project is consistent with the following policies in the Environment, the Parks and Open Space, the Preservation and Historic Features, and Visitors Elements:

- Enhance parks and preserve open green space for future generations.
- Establish and preserve historic parks as important legacies of national, historic, architectural, and landscape significance.
- Encourage the use of innovative and environmentally friendly “Best Management Practices” in site and building design and construction practice, such as green roofs, to reduce erosion and avoid pollution of surface waters.
- Encourage the implementation of water reclamation programs at federal facilities for landscape irrigation purposes and other appropriate uses.
- Protect and enhance the vistas and views, both natural and designed that are an integral part of the national capital’s image.
- Identify and protect both the significant historic design integrity and the use of historic landscapes and open space.
- Continue to sponsor displays, special events, and arts, cultural, and recreational activities in, on, and around federal facilities in the monumental core, in other areas of the District, and throughout the region.

### **National Mall Plan**

The National Mall Plan seeks to rehabilitate and refurbish the National Mall so that very high levels of use can be perpetuated and the needs of all visitors and users can be met in an attractive, high-quality, energy-efficient, and sustainable manner. The plan establishes a framework to protect memorials and landscapes while maintaining large areas of unprogrammed open space. The plan seeks to balance contemporary uses while respecting the planned historic landscapes of the L’Enfant and McMillan plans.

The National Mall Plan establishes the following objective for the Mall (between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Streets):

- Remain a highly visible landscape that would be renovated to improve conditions and to sustainably accommodate very high levels of use for First Amendment demonstrations, public gatherings, national celebrations, cultural programs, and special events, as well as passive recreation and informal play.

In order to achieve this objective the National Mall Plan calls for the following:

- Protection and improvement of lawn panels.
- Replacement of compacted soils in turf areas with engineered soils that can withstand intense use, or implement other sustainable technologies.
- Provide drainage and irrigation; design an irrigation system so that it will not be damaged by event facilities
- Widen some walks to enhance the visitor experience by providing room for orientation and space for rest and enjoyment, to facilitate First Amendment demonstrations and permitted events, and to allow for more efficient park operations.
- Redesign the 12<sup>th</sup> Street axis to accommodate high levels of use, and the placement of tents, stages, and logistical and operational areas for permitted events.
- Reconfigure the center grass panels near the 8<sup>th</sup> Street cross axis to provide larger spaces for informal recreation.

Phase II and III of the turf and soil reconstruction project are consistent with the Mall Plan objectives listed above.

#### **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)**

NCPC and NPS each have an independent responsibility to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA); NCPC's responsibility stems from its approval authority over the project. In accordance with the Council on Environmental Quality's rules for implementing NEPA, and the Commission's Environmental and Historic Preservation Policies and Procedures, NPS prepared the National Mall Turf and Soil Reconstruction Environmental Assessment (EA) in 2010. The EA analyzed an action alternative and a no action alternative. Within the action alternative, three curb and gutter options were evaluated that analyzed the edge conditions for the lawn panels and the transition between the walkways and the turf. Three options were also analyzed for the reconstruction of the soil that explored different materials and design. The EA also evaluated different systems of water distribution, irrigation, and water storage. Topics analyzed in the EA include: visitor use and experience, public safety, park operations and management, utilities and infrastructure, soils, vegetation, visual resources, and cultural resources. NPS issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) on January 21, 2011. NCPC issued a FONSI for Phase I of the project on January 25, 2011. NCPC's FONSI for Phase I stated that subsequent Phases of the project would be reviewed independently under NEPA.

In March 2013, NPS issued a Memo to File stating that the EA prepared in 2010 and NPS FONSI issued in 2011 adequately analyzed and described the impacts of the project including the widening and reconfigured walkways. NCPC independently reviewed the information submitted in the Memo to File and the EA prepared in 2010 and also determined that all impacts of Phases II and III of the project had been adequately analyzed. NCPC issued a FONSI for Phases II and III on March 25, 2013.

#### **National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)**

NCPC and NPS each have an independent responsibility to comply with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). During Phase I of the project, NPS consulted with the District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Officer (DC SHPO) as well as NCPC, the

U.S. Commission of Fine Arts and other interested parties. NPS determined Phase I would have no adverse effect on historic properties and the DC SHPO concurred with that finding. NPS continued Section 106 consultation for Phases II and III of the project in 2012 and in August 2012, the DC SHPO concurred with a no adverse effect finding for Phases II and III. NCPC also determined Phases II and III would not have an adverse effect on historic properties and the DC SHPO concurred with NCPC's finding.

### **III. CONSULTATION**

#### **Coordinating Committee**

The Coordinating Committee reviewed the proposal at its March 13, 2013 meeting, and forwarded the proposal to the Commission with the statement that the proposal has been coordinated with all participating agencies. The participating agencies were NCPC; the National Park Service; the U.S. General Services Administration; the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority; the District of Columbia Office of Planning; the District Department of Transportation; and the District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Officer.

#### **U.S. Commission of Fine Arts**

At its meeting on March 21, 2013, CFA approved the final design for the reconfiguration of the walkways and center lawn panels. In its approval, CFA noted the proposed design balances the rehabilitation of the historic Mall with the ability to accommodate large public events.